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Maria Phillips

It should not be surprising that the ideal of beauty mutates over time. In jewelry, these shifts have been profound. By the late 1990s, it might have seemed that some jewelers embraced ugliness. However, some of them were responding to circumstances unknown to previous generations. Influences from Arte Povera and artists like Eva Hesse filtered into jewelry. Humble materials and unfinished surfaces looked much more attractive than before. Moreover, some jewelers were deeply touched by recent thinking about entropy and the abject¹; such ideas seemed negative to older artists but younger makers saw them as realistic explanations of a chaotic world.

One jeweler who was fascinated by entropy was Maria Phillips (b. 1963). She became obsessed with deterioration and aging, seeing two broad implications. In the natural world, she observed, death is always part of a larger ecosystem, a continuous process of recycling. Our awareness of death reminds us that we cannot stand at a remove from nature and its cycles. Phillips found a compelling beauty in the signs of disintegration and decay, a beauty both philosophical and visual.

In the late '90s, she developed several techniques to represent entropy. She built podlike frameworks of iron wire over which she stretched translucent membranes of pig gut. Salts and moisture in the gut rusted the iron, yielding reddish stains. Phillips grouped the pods together, like bunches of sick bananas. The mottled gut, resembling dead skin, spoke of decay, and yet the accumulated forms spoke of fertility.

Phillips also found she could electroform decaying fruits and vegetables—their wrinkled and saggy forms a literal representation of entropy. She did not want them to be recognizable, though, so she enameled them in her own color schemes. The surfaces, which she ground down, re-fired, cracked and patinated, were highly unusual—eroded, pitted, surpassingly strange brooches and necklaces quite new to American jewelry.

Not satisfied to simply lay her jewelry on a tabletop, Phillips made wall mounts, which turned into small environments. She disassembled old tinplate dollhouses and rebuilt them into fragments of architecture. To cut back the bright sheen of the printing, she sanded the tinplate down to faded, scuffed surfaces. In these shelters, her jewelry forms seemed to be bizarre dolls hanging out in ruins—with the story line open to the viewer's imagination.

Phillips's jewelry may be an acquired taste. Her sense of beauty does not rely on any of the conventions of jewelry, but there is a certain rustic appeal, and there is always a sense of regeneration. Her swelling pods and seeds signify rebirth. Her palette always includes touches of red, the color of blood and passion. Gloom is balanced with a touch of hopefulness.